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Iraq's Middle Class Is the Key to Unity

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As the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) pushes forward with democratization, challenges to Iraq's national unity will emerge. Sectarian and ethnic divides will influence the [constitutional process](#), the formation of the Iraqi governing structures, and the transfer of authority from the CPA. Addressing sectarian and ethnic issues will be critical not only for reconstruction efforts but also for Iraq's unity and territorial integrity.

The United States Institute of Peace convened its [Iraq Working Group](#) on December 12, 2003 to discuss "Iraq: E Pluribus Unum?" The group analyzed the centripetal forces challenging the national Iraq's unity and how the CPA can strengthen unifying forces. The group included distinguished experts on Iraq, as well as U.S. government officials, non-governmental organizations, and academics. Institute [Peace and Stability Operations](#) director Daniel Serwer chaired the meeting.

The views summarized below reflect the discussion at the meeting; they do not represent formal positions taken by the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

Iraq is going through an identity crisis...

Decades of brutality under the regime of Saddam Hussein have eroded but not destroyed the sense of Iraqi identity, formed only in the 20th century. Ethnic identity now plays a much stronger role in Iraq than it once did, mainly because of the regime's favoritism towards the Sunni minority and its repression of Kurdish and Shia rebellions.

First among the challenges to national unity is the Kurdish issue in the north. More than a decade of self-rule and Kurdish nationalist leadership outside the Ba'ath regime has led to a growing sense of Kurdish identity. The study of Arabic language has been downgraded and Kurdish knowledge of Arabic is now weaker. The educational system promotes a strong sense of Kurdish identity, albeit one that emphasizes the human rights of individual citizens. Kurds are aware that their aspirations for an independent state are not likely to be fulfilled any time soon and that defending an independent Kurdish state wedged between a hostile Iran, a more hostile Turkey, and an Arab Iraq would be daunting. Nevertheless, abating Kurdish national aspirations and reintegrating the three Kurdish provinces—not to mention demobilization of the Kurdish militias—will be a pose a serious challenge.

The Shia community has also been developing its own sense of identity in Iraq, albeit more religious than separatist in nature. Shia ambitions are to dominate Iraq, not to divide it. Repression under Hussein nearly eliminated the Shia secular leadership, and as a result a religious elite has emerged. Still, the Shia

community lacks homogeneity and is split among secular, moderate, and religious groupings. They agree on one thing: the demand for proportional representation in an Iraqi government, which would give the Shia 60 percent or more of the Parliament and government positions.

Finally, there is a growing sense of Sunni identity, especially among those who have lost privileges once enjoyed under the Ba'ath regime. This trend is more apparent outside Baghdad, particularly in rural areas of the so-called Sunni "triangle." Recently there has been an increase in religious fundamentalism, particularly among the younger generations. Sunni urban elites, however, who compose a significant part of the Iraqi middle-class, display less sectarian orientations and engage in interaction across sectarian and ethnic lines. Integrating this body of technocrats, businessmen, and political elites will be critical for the reconstruction of Iraq.

...and drastic transformations

The coalition occupation of Iraq has brought with it radical changes. Pan-Arab ideology, which hampered the emergence of a strong Iraqi national identity, is waning. The emerging Iraqi identity is likely to be more religious in character; fierce debates can be expected on the role of the Sharia and women. A stronger role for religion may also provoke sectarian violence or, paradoxically, may bring together Sunni and Shia communities in opposing the coalition presence in Iraq.

The new Iraq will necessarily see much stronger roles for the Kurdish and Shia communities than during the Ba'ath regime. This will challenge the traditional preeminence of the center of Iraq vis-à-vis its peripheries. Striking the right balance is important. Nearly fifty percent of all Iraqis live in five of its central provinces, thirty percent in ten of its southern provinces, and fifteen percent in the north.

Iraq is highly urbanized: nearly 75 percent of its population and the majority of the middle-class live in cities. Much of the Sunni, urban middle class was co-opted by the Ba'ath regime and is hesitating to support coalition efforts. This vital reservoir of potential support for democratization efforts needs to be mobilized if the coalition is to meet its objectives.

The CPA can strengthen unifying forces by supporting the middle class

Coalition efforts can either promote a unifying Iraqi identity or unintentionally undermine it. The coalition needs to target its efforts by strengthening unifying forces and undermining sectarian temptations. There are many ways to do this:

- Move away from ethnic balancing of political institutions towards issue-oriented policies.
- Build nongovernmental organizations that cut across ethnic and sectarian lines.
- Use oil revenues to revitalize the middle-class and strengthen it economically.
- Provide wide economic opportunities, including loans to small and medium size businesses, especially for women and family business.
- Balance the emergence of Najaf, Karbala, and other cities as independent centers with attention to Baghdad's future role.
- Support professionalism, particularly among civil servants.
- Provide civic education for all.
- Reform education on all levels, emphasizing social sciences and humanities.
- Encourage the creation and development of private universities.
- Open Iraq to the rest of the world.

There is the risk that in undertaking to strengthen the middle class the CPA will find itself supporting former Ba'athist elements. While being careful to exclude those with blood on their hands, the CPA needs

to find ways of rehabilitating those who were co-opted into the Ba'ath regime and allowing them to contribute to the future of Iraq.

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Daniel Serwer](#) and Ylber Bajraktari of the Institute's Office of [Peace and Stability Operations](#). The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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